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Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

The Northern Bombing

THE CAT is out of the bag. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have been publicly revealed as pressing the President to intensify the bombing of North Vietnam still further, and especially to permit the destruction of the vital North Vietnamese oil fuel stores.



Alsop

As usual in Lyndon Johnson's Washington, the whole problem of the northern bombing has been muddled and obscured as much as possible. So it may be as well to remove some of the muddle before analyzing the Joint Chiefs' recommendation.

To begin with, when the peace offensive and bombing pause came to an end, there was a report that the permitted bombing area in the North was much more limited, by the President's order, than it had been before the pause began. The report was officially denied. But it was also used as a lever for a spate of other reports that the President's post-pause policy was to "limit the war," which were not denied.

THE REALITIES behind all this were quite different from the public appearance. First, the military planners in both Washington and Saigon believed that the high-priority, immediately post-pause, should be given to bombing the bridges and other useful targets on the lines of communication directly feeding the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These are in the most southerly provinces of North Vietnam. And in this manner, the initial bombing area was in fact temporarily restricted.

Second, however, far from "limiting" our effort against the North, the President has already authorized a major intensification. The approved sortie rate—the number of missions flown against northern targets—was tripled after the pause ended. Weather permitting, therefore, we are now dropping three times as many bombs on northern targets as we did pre-pause.

This earlier decision to triple the weight of bombing points, of course, to-

wards just the kind of further intensification that the Joint Chiefs are now pressing on the President. Two things stand in the way.

One is the fact that the biggest fuel depot in North Vietnam is in the outskirts of Haiphong, and the second biggest is in the outskirts of Hanoi. The other is a hand-tailored intelligence analysis concluding that the truck movement over the Ho Chi Minh Trail would not be seriously hampered, even if all the fuel depots in North Vietnam were completely destroyed.

The analysis in question rouses the unavoidable suspicion that its preparation was somehow linked to the President's invariable hankering to conserve what he calls his "options"—in this case, the option of not bombing in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas. At any rate, those who reached the conclusion summarized above must clearly have been taking lessons from Alice in Wonderland's chum, the White Queen, who proudly boasted that she had often managed to "believe six impossible things before breakfast."

NOTWITHSTANDING the analysis, it is clear that the President will eventually discover he has no option whatever, except to follow the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs. The facts leave him none, and it is a bit shocking that the facts have not been faced and the key decision has not yet been taken.

Briefly, the revised intelligence estimates that caused such a panic in Washington and produced the vaudeville-peace offensive, predict a buildup of enemy regular units in South Vietnam to a level equivalent to no less than 18 divisions. The estimates also predict a rise in deliveries over the Ho Chi Minh Trail to a level well above 6000 tons a month.

The latter is the key figure in the estimates, for without tonnage coming in to sustain them, the addition of new enemy regular forces in the South would actually be counterproductive. Given the character of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the character of the terrain it traverses, and the distances that have to be covered, a huge truck movement, involving 2000 or 3000 vehicles, will be needed to lay down 6000 tons monthly in South Vietnam.

Ammunition to be used against our troops will be the most important com-

modity carried by those trucks. How then can the President refrain from doing everything in his power to halt or at least to greatly diminish the truck movement?

For the need is most emphatically not for area-bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. The need is for pinpoint bombing to destroy the fuel depots in the outskirts of these cities and elsewhere in North Vietnam. It is a purely military need.

The President constantly proclaims his worry about "pressure from the Hawks." He ought instead to welcome a public demand to get on with the war by doing what needs doing. And in this case, he will surely have to do what needs doing in the end.

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